Great Depression Primary Sources

**A Great Depression-era Letter to First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt**

Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt,   
Washington D.C.

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt

On January 1st I was layed off from my work leaving my father the whole support of our family. just recently he was cut down to three days a week with a cut in salary. With seven of us in the family it is just about impossible for us to live on this amount.

My mother has been sick for over two months having had a nervous breakdown and we are unable to buy or furnish her with the medicine required for her recovery.

I am 18 years of age the oldest girl in the family, and it just seems impossible for me to get a job any where. I have been to Mills, Stores and Firms of all sorts. I am willing and able to work. Can furnish excellent references but at this time of the year it just seems impossible to find work.

We are so in debt and each week the bills are piling higher and higher that it just seems as if there was no way out….

It would be a big help if we could get some of our bills paid on as they are already impatient for their money.

If you could help us out with from $35.00 to $50.00 I believe we would be the happiest family in the world.

We have a good respectable family, none of us have ever been in any trouble, and our characters are above reproach.

Just as soon as I get back to work and the family on their feet again I will pay you back as much a week as possible until your kind favor has been fully repaid.

My father's work has been very poor for the past year. He is an advertising salesman, and his work right now is practically nothing; and as he has had kidney trouble for some time, taking more than he could make, for medicine. He has been improving recently, since he had his teeth extracted, and is looking forward to a job but which will not be available for a month or more. We went through the depression without asking for relief. I registered January 14th for unemployment compensation, and although promised $6.25 a week, have not received a cent as yet.

Won't you please grant me the afore mentioned favor, please make it a personal favor, Mrs. Roosevelt, for if you would refer it to a local agency, I would suffer untold delay and embarrassment.

Altough we are poor, we try to hold off embarrassment, for you know it is "hard to be broke, and harder to admit it."

Please grant me this favor and I will ever be

Gratefully yours,   
D.B.

[**http://newdeal.feri.org/eleanor/db0238.htm**](http://newdeal.feri.org/eleanor/db0238.htm)

**Pantoum of the Great Depression by Donald Justice**

Our lives avoided tragedy  
Simply by going on and on,  
Without end and with little apparent meaning.  
Oh, there were storms and small catastrophes.

Simply by going on and on  
We managed. No need for the heroic.  
Oh, there were storms and small catastrophes.  
I don't remember all the particulars.

We managed. No need for the heroic.  
There were the usual celebrations, the usual sorrows.  
I don't remember all the particulars.  
Across the fence, the neighbors were our chorus.

There were the usual celebrations, the usual sorrows  
Thank god no one said anything in verse.  
The neighbors were our only chorus,  
And if we suffered we kept quiet about it.

At no time did anyone say anything in verse.  
It was the ordinary pities and fears consumed us,  
And if we suffered we kept quiet about it.  
No audience would ever know our story.

It was the ordinary pities and fears consumed us.  
We gathered on porches; the moon rose; we were poor.  
What audience would ever know our story?  
Beyond our windows shone the actual world.

We gathered on porches; the moon rose; we were poor.  
And time went by, drawn by slow horses.  
Somewhere beyond our windows shone the world.  
The Great Depression had entered our souls like fog.

And time went by, drawn by slow horses.  
We did not ourselves know what the end was.  
The Great Depression had entered our souls like fog.  
We had our flaws, perhaps a few private virtues.

But we did not ourselves know what the end was.  
People like us simply go on.  
We have our flaws, perhaps a few private virtues,  
But it is by blind chance only that we escape tragedy.

And there is no plot in that; it is devoid of poetry.

<http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/donaldjustice/7837>

**Excerpts from Herbert Hoover’s Inaugural Address, March 1929**

“If we survey the situation of our Nation both at home and abroad, we find many satisfactions; we find some causes for concern. We have emerged from the losses of the Great War and the reconstruction following it with increased virility and strength. From this strength we have contributed to the recovery and progress of the world. What America has done has given renewed hope and courage to all who have faith in government by the people. In the large view, we have reached a higher degree of comfort and security than ever existed before in the history of the world. Through liberation from widespread poverty we have reached a higher degree of individual freedom than ever before….

“The larger purpose of our economic thought should be to establish more firmly stability and security of business and employment and thereby remove poverty still further from our borders.”

<http://www.hooverassociation.org/hoover/speeches/inaugural_address.php>

**Excerpts from FDR’s First Inaugural Address, 1933**

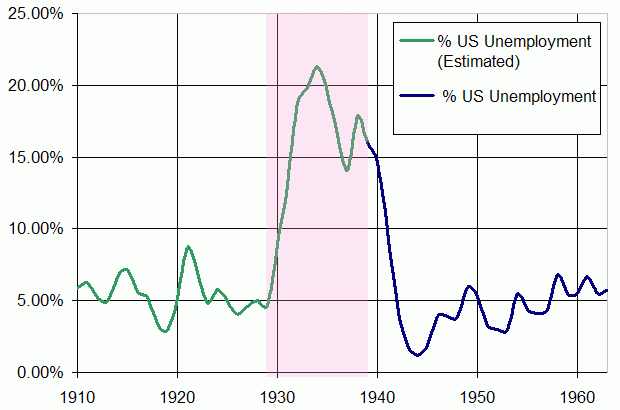
“I am certain that my fellow Americans expect that on my induction into the Presidency I will address them with a candor and a decision which the present situation of our people impel. This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory. I am convinced that you will again give that support to leadership in these critical days….

“Plenty is at our doorstep, but a generous use of it languishes in the very sight of the supply. Primarily this is because the rulers of the exchange of mankind’s goods have failed, through their own stubbornness and their own incompetence, have admitted their failure, and abdicated. Practices of the unscrupulous money changers stand indicted in the court of public opinion, rejected by the hearts and minds of men…..

“Our greatest primary task is to put people to work. This is no unsolvable problem if we face it wisely and courageously…..”

[**http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5057/**](http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5057/)

**Great Depression Unemployment Graph**

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<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:US_Unemployment_1910-1960.gif>

**Oral History from 1920’s Riches to Great Depression Lack (From WPA Writer’s Project)**

Herman Kirschbaum tells his story to B. Hathaway (WPA worker)

“Mein fader was in Courland like a rich man here. He had great acres of land -- hundreds of acres. He traded in land and became very rich. He was like bourgeoisie here. Petty bourgeois.

He had the biggest house in town. That was in Courland, in old Russia. In a little town near Libau….

“…I paid for the tickets an' we landed in New York. That was in 1912. Prices were very low then. I still had a little money left. For fifteen cents you could buy a whole meal. I'll never forget those meals!

I was in the manufacturing, or assembling branch of the industry. That is, the putting together of the furs and the cloth into the finished garment.

Well, inside of two years I was getting fifty or sixty dollars a week. I was sitting pretty. From shoestrings to half a hundred per -- pretty good, eh? It went a little to my head.

It was the war [World War I] that did the trick. The war created a demand for American products. Up jumped prices. And up jumped wages. There were no more fifteen-cent meals on Rivington Street. They were charging forty-five and fifty cents for the same thing now.

I moved up to Riverside Drive and went in for culture.

I wore expensive clothes, smoked high priced cigars, paid four prices for food. And if that ain't culture---

But, as I say, the depression came. Everything has a catch in it. Now I'm on relief...

Yes, my parents are still living. In a little town near Ahnt verp , in Belgium….My oldest brother has a little business in Ahnt verp , or near it, rather. My father and mother live with him. They are very old and living is cheap there. Now and then I send them ten dollars. They can live a week, both of them, on that in Ahnt verp ....

An' that, gentlemen, is how I happened to be in Union Square, on the bright summer night of September 19, 1938 -- or the 20th rather-- and enjoying the hospitality of Uncle Sam, of whom I had never even heard in my Courland home; instead of lingering there, like a barnacle still, in a village near the present city of Libau.

I am not there. I am here…

An' that's why.”

<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/wpa:@field(DOCID+@lit(wpa221060316))>



Civilian Conservation Corps workers in Maryland

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8a00073/>



[U.S. Officials Destroying Liquor at the Brownsville Customs House](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.award/txuruny.08690),

<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/h?ammem/runyon:@field%28NUMBER+@band%28txuruny+08690%29%29>

**Great Depression Headline—October 20, 1929**

**Public Liquidation Spurred by Bears, Hits Low Market**  
**Scare Orders From All Over Country Halt Ticker an Hour in Feverish Day**  
By Laurence Stern

With speculative nerves rubbed raw under the persistent hammering of bearish traders, a renewed wave of public liquidation swept over the stock market yesterday, depressing prices severely and hopelessly clogging the quotation ticker…

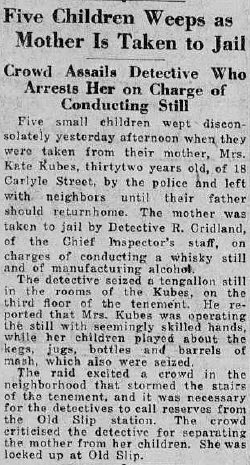
...To the majority of the market’s followers, who now must be counted in millions, the most significant aspect of the decline is that it has carried the average level of the list to a lower point than was reached on Oct. 4 in the sharp break that climaxed a month of gradual recession.

This raises a pertinent question, whether the bull movement of the last five years has definitely given way to a liquidating market…

— The World, October 20, 1929

[**http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/crash-headlines/**](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/crash-headlines/)

**1922 Prohibition-Era News Article, New York Tribune, Sept. 14, 1922**

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<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1922-09-14/ed-1/seq-9/>